

VZCZCXRO7268

RR RUEHHM RUEHLN RUEHMA RUEHPB RUEHPOD
DE RUEHNE #1242/01 1280706

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

R 070706Z MAY 08 ZDK

FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1622

RUEHBBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 1963

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2150

RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 2853

RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHDC

RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001242

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR OES/PCI, OES/ENRC, OES/ENV, OES/OA, AND SCA/INS

STATE PASS TO NSF FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

INTERIOR FOR FRED BAGLEY AND MINI NAGENDRAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV IN

SUBJECT: CORAL REEFS IN INDIA'S NATIONAL MARINE PARK: DROWNING IN A SEA OF SEDIMENT

NEW DELHI 00001242 001.4 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: EmbOffs recently traveled to India's Gujarat state and met with the Director of the Marine National Park, Mr. D.S. Narve, in order to discuss the condition of the park's coral reefs, the United States' position as the co-secretariat of the International Coral Reef Initiative, and the effect of 2008 being declared the International Year of the Reef. A field visit revealed the park's corals, as well as the entire ecosystem, were highly threatened by sediment deposits coming from dredging operations in Kandla Port. A separate meeting with the Senior Coordinator of the World Wide Fund for Nature's Marine Program in India revealed the state of the park's corals was not nearly as rosy as portrayed by Director Narve. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The Marine National Park (MNP) encompasses 162.89 sq.kms and is located along the southern boundary of the Gulf of Kutch, an extension of the Arabian Sea surrounded on three sides by Gujarat state. MNP is home to a wide variety of species including both hard and soft corals, sponges, jelly fish, dolphins, dugongs, and sea turtles. It was declared a National Park in 1982 making it the first protected marine environment in India. However, what protection it currently enjoys is not nearly enough to conserve this fragile ecosystem.

STATUS OF MARINE NATIONAL PARK

¶3. (U) Unlike India's land-based National Parks, which suffer greatly due to intense pressure from India's burgeoning population, MNP has almost no direct population pressure. Conservator of Forests and Director of MNP, Mr. D.S. Narve, stated the reason for this was that Gujaratis, and Northern Indians in particular, are a terrestrial people with little interest in the sea barring certain fishing communities. He stated that while MNP did see some local tourism, access to the reefs was difficult and that tourism had not had a major impact. In addition, the land directly adjoining much of MNP is not sufficient to sustain large populations. EmbOffs traveled to an inter-tidal region of MNP near Positra and noted the complete absence of people and almost no land based pollution or litter. In an area of approximately four square kilometers, Emboffs found nothing more than a single discarded potato chip bag and two tangles of monofilament fishing line. In India, where both trash and people are essentially everywhere, this is remarkable.

¶4. (U) During the field visit, Director Narve's staff did everything possible to demonstrate to EmbOff's the alleged rich diversity of MNP. They were able to locate and point out a few fish

and crab species and a reasonable amount of both plate and small brain coral although nothing compared to what is found in a healthy inter-tidal zone. In addition, all of the coral was covered by heavy deposits of sediment which, according to Narve, originated in dredging operations in Kandla Port located on the north coast of the Gulf of Kutch. He noted the currents in the gulf run clockwise from north to south bringing any sediment deposited in the northern half of the gulf directly to MNP. When asked whether anyone had suggested depositing the spoils from the dredging on land or in a less ecologically sensitive location in the sea, Narve stated the issue had never been addressed. Narve also said his office had had no dealings with any NGOs interested in protecting MNP.

¶15. (SBU) In addition to sedimentation due to dredging, EmbOffs raised the issue of the refineries of Indian Oil, Essar Oil, and Reliance Industries located near MNP. Narve stated there has never been a problem with the oil industry negatively impacting the marine ecosystem. When asked about the results of the relocation of over three hundred coral reefs necessitated by the laying of an undersea oil pipeline by Essar Oil directly through MNP in 2005, Narve stated the relocated corals were doing well and that the project, paid for by Essar and carried out by scientists of India's National Institute of Oceanography, was a great success.

¶16. (U) Narve welcomed U.S. leadership on reef conservation and praised U.S. efforts as co-secretariat of the International Coral Reef Initiative. He stated he was looking forward to attending the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium in Fort Lauderdale in July 2008 and that U.S. assistance for reef conservation in India was most welcome. When asked to elaborate further on the threats to MNP, Narve maintained that dredging at Kandla Port was the main threat along with siltation due to the loss of coastal mangroves. He pointed out his office was active in planting new mangroves, which EmbOffs noted in the field visit to Positra, but that there was little he could do about the dredging issue. He dismissed concerns over illegal fishing and said that coral mining had been

NEW DELHI 00001242 002.4 OF 002

completely halted over the last few years.

THE NGO PERSPECTIVE

¶17. (U) In a follow-on meeting, EmbOffs discussed the state of MNP with Fahmeeda Hanfee, the Senior Coordinator of the Marine Program at the World Wide Fund for Nature - India. Ms. Hanfee was very frank in stating that awareness of the need for marine conservation was not well developed in India and echoed many of the sentiments of Director Narve that Indians were a terrestrially focused people. She stated the fact that 2008 had been declared the International Year of the Reef was essentially unknown in India and that few would care if it was publicized. Drawing a contrast with terrestrial conservation in India, she noted the dozens of NGOs involved with tiger conservation but stated there were virtually none dedicated to marine issues. She said WWF-India itself did not have a significant coral reef program and that their marine activities were currently focused on sea turtle conservation. She did note that India's National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) was very active in studying coral reefs and that her contacts at NIO had informed her that over 60 percent of the coral species relocated by Essar Oil in MNP had died. She also stated there was real concern among marine biologists of a potential oil spill in MNP and that the threat of the oil industry to the marine ecosystem could not be discounted. Finally, she confirmed that her information was the same as Director Narve's, that sediment from dredging at Kandla Port was choking the coral in MNP.

COMMENT

¶18. (SBU) While it comes as no surprise that Director Narve put the best possible spin on the situation in MNP, readily admitting he directed his staff to take us to one of the most pristine locations in the park, the reality on the ground was evident to see. Although

there is still a living ecosystem visible in the inter-tidal zone near Positra, the lack of species and the fact that the entire area, including all of the coral, was covered in thick sediment, demonstrates a strong need for better conservation beginning with changing the dredging practices at Kandla Port. Embassy New Delhi's ESTH office will seek opportunities to engage Government of India and Gujarat state officials in order to address the issue.

MULFORD